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ABSTRACT

Coverage of two Third World countries, Mexico and Lebanon, by "Time" and "Newsweek" magazines was analyzed by comparing the cultural differences in meanings attached to words used in the magazines to describe the two countries. Stories were collected about the countries from each issue of the magazines published in 1979. The first two paragraphs of each story were searched for words previously identified as having specific cultural values. The results produced no evidence to support the argument that the Third World countries are covered in mostly negative ways. The findings supported the argument that more of the differences found in news coverage of Third World countries are in cultural meanings attached to certain words rather than in differences in descriptions of the countries themselves. (FL)

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The Cultural Meaning of Foreign News

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The Cultural Meaning of Foreign News

Inroduction

Among the complaints against the dominance of the West in international communication, one that has received relatively little attention from researchers is the charge that Western news coverage of the Third World is filtered through a narrow cultural filter which, at best, is insensitive to non-Western cultural values and, at worst, a distortion of those values.

On the whole, recent research (Stevenson, Cole and Shaw, 1980; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1980) has not supported contentions voiced in Unesco and other world forums that the underdeveloped part of the planet is singled out for unusually negative treatment in the Western media. But the conclusion that problems of reporting the Third World are really problems common to all Western journalism is neither persuasive to Third World critics of Western journalistic practice nor to researchers who are uneasy with the conclusion that Pravda and the New York Times provide essentially the same kind of foreign news coverage.

In this paper, we address the question of whether complaints about treatment of the Third World in the Western media could be explained on another basis. We will examine the subjective or cultural meanings that are attached to words used in coverage of two diverse countries of the Third World. Using data collected by Osgood in a large-scale international test of

the familiar semantic differential, we can examine differences in coverage of Lebanon and Mexico in two American news magazines and relate those differences to differences in subjective meanings attached to that coverage in the two cultures. We will ask whether coverage of these two countries differs or whether the perception of differences lies in the cultural meanings attached to the coverage.

Western Values in World News?

Complaints against Western news coverage of the Third World cover two distinct grievances. On one hand, it is charged that Western news interest in the three-quarters of humanity who inhabit the less-developed countries is limited mostly to coverage of coups and earthquakes, the title of a witty and perceptive book (Rosenblum, 1979) about the problems and perils of international correspondence.

Mustapha Masmoudi (1979), the Tunisian minister of information and a leading architect of the New World Information Order which seeks a more equitable distribution of the world's information resources, put it this way in a statement to the MacBride Commission, the 16-member committee appointed by Unesco to examine internatinal communication problems:

> Western media describe the Third World [countries] -- when indeed they show interest in them -- in the most unfavorable light, stressing crises, strikes, street demonstrations, putches, etc., or even holding them up to ridicule. [Current news practice in the West] consists in highlighting events whose significance in certain cases is limited or even non-existent, in collecting isolated facts in such a way that the

> conclusions to be drawn from them are necessarily favorable to the interests of the transnatonal system, in amplifying small-scale events so as to arouse justified fears; in keeping silent on situations unfavorable to the interests of the countries of origin of these media.

In a two-year study of foreign news in which we collaborated with colleagues in a dozen countries to examine the foreign news coverage of about 30 countries covering a broad range of levels of development and political systems, we found little evidence to support this charge. In a paper to this convention last year which reported results of the analysis of both Western national media and Western news agencies (Stevenson, Cole and Shaw, 1980), we concluded:

> The assertion that the Western agencies ignore the Third World in regional service to those parts of the world is simply not true. The industrialized West is less prominent in these services, and in general, North America gets less attention than Europe. The invisible part of the world is the socialist Second World....
>
> The argument that the Third World is singled out for special treatment is also not supported by [our] data. News emphasizing politics is by and large the standard all over the world. This narrow definition of news and equally narrow definition of newsmakers is a problem of journalism, not a problem of Western coverage of the Third World.

Nor did we find much support for the second criticism of Western coverage of the Third World, that it is filtered through a narrow Western perspective and both distorts coverage from the Third World and imposes on that part of the world a set of alien cultural values. Masmoudi argued the point in his statement to

the Unesco commission:

> [I]nformation is distorted by reference to moral, cultural or political values pecular to certain states, in defiance of the values and concerns of other nations. The criteria governing selections are consciously or unconsciously based on the political and economic interests of the transnational system and of the countries in which this system is established.

Gerald Long, the managing director of Reuters (1977), acknowledges that:

> It is pointless to try to separate, in any society, what are called its news values and its general values, national or international. The values which are called news values will have been formed by the various processes in the society that form values. It is the same process that molds all values.

But do these general cultural values lead to a distortion of Third World coverage or impose an alien system? On the whole, we have found very little evidence of the existence of these cultural values in Western news coverage. The favorite example of frequent reference in Western media to "Marxist President Allende" but never the reciprocal "Capitalist President Johnson" is, after all, nearly 15 years old, and we suspect that the Western news agencies and major media have, in fact, become more sensitive to these concerns. We have argued (Stevenson and Cole, 1980) that one of the reasons for the special importance -- and de facto dominance -- of Western news agencies around the world is that their coverage is mostly free of such cultural and political labels.

In our examination of the foreign news media of 17 countries and regional files of the four Western agencies, we found evidence that most of the political shadings were added at the level of Third World national news agency or media. Harris (1977) describes the process in Ghana:

> While the use of political adjectives (in Western agency coverage) annoyed the foreign staff the problem was not insurmountable -- all that was really involved was changing the adjective. One of the most common examples cited in this context was the substitution in stories about Rhodesia, South Africa, Angola, etc., of "nationalists" or "freedom fighters" for "guerrillas" or "terrorists." Another example was that stories about Ian Smith would generally be rephrased to describe him as the "racist Ian Smith." One minor reservation was made about such substitution by a few foreign editors, particularly with reference to changing "terrorist" to "nationalist" or to "freedom fighter" -- this substitution would only be made if the editor believed that the "cause for whch they are fighting is just" -- that is, in the African interest. This, in practice, meant that most stories would be amended.

If Ian Smith fared badly at the hands of the Ghana News Agency in 1976, his press image has not improved since then. In our study, for example, we found constant references in the Zambian media to the "racist puppet Ian Smith" and his "sham, bogus election" in the spring of 1979. It is not likely that these adjectives were in the original AP or Reuters copy.

It is easy to dismiss these complaints of Western bias as a function of national pride or lack of familiarity with the methods of skeptical and sometimes cynical Western reporters. And indeed we suspect that cross-cultural bias -- like political bias (Stevenson and Greene, 1980) -- is more in the

eye of the beholder than in the media themselves.

But in dealing with the kinds of complaints raised by Masmoudi and others, another factor must be taken into consideration. It is the problem of cultural differences in the meanings of words. By this phrase, we do not mean problems of translation or finding the equivalents in different languages but rather the subjective meaning in words that makes, as Steiner (1977) put it, "house" different from "Haus" or "casa" or "dom." Steiner argues:

> Each and every human tongue is a distinct window onto the world. Looking through it, the native speaker enters an emotional and spiritual space, a framework of memory, a promontory on tomorrow, which no other window in the great house at Babel quite matches. Thus every language mirrors and generates a possible world, an alternative reality.

Osgood's method of specifying cross-cultural differences of subjective meaning was his familiar semantic differential (Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum, 1957) which isolated and measured three dimensions of connotative or subjective meaning. He argued that each person defined the personal or subjective meaning of words on the basis of three universal dimensions: evaluative (whether the object was good or bad); activity (whether it was active or passive); and potency (whether it was strong or weak). This conceptualization of subjective meaning -- and the measurement technique which derived from it -- is surely one of the most popular and important contributions to social psychology ever made; the semantic differential has

traveled around the world and been borrowed by users in as diverse interests as political campaigns and psychotherapy.

The original formulation of the semantic differential emphasized individual differences, but in the cross-cultural studies, the emphasis was on isolating differences among different language and cultural groups. Osgood argued (Osgood, May and Miron, 1975) that while differences in subjective meaning were found in individuals, cultural or linguistic differences existed as well; that is, each language group defined words differently, beyond individual differences. One of the major outcomes of the project was the development of "linguistic atlases" which specified the cultural values assigned to a common vocabulary list of 620 words by each of the 23 language groups in the project.

These linguistic atlases can be used to test how (and whether) news coverage of Third World countries can be perceived differently in different countries. If, in fact, subjective meanings of words used in news reporting vary from country to country, these differences could account for at least part of difference between rigorous quantitative research which finds little difference between First and Third World news coverage in the Western media and Third World complaints which contend the Third World is unfairly singled out for negative coverage.

Method

To examine subjective meanings of words in international news coverage, we focused on two very different Third World

countries, Lebanon and Mexico. We collected stories about these two countries from 1979 issues of Time and Newsweek.

The two leading news magazines were chosen for two reasons. One was that it avoided the problem of translation because, while the two magazines circulate widely throughout most of the world, they appear only in English. The second was that, unlike the news agencies and newsfilm services from which "alien" values can be expunged by national gatekeepers, news magazines exist only in the form in which they are originally edited. Of all the Western media which circulate in the Third World, the news magazines are the most "foreign," both in language and editorial control.

From the first two paragraphs of each story about Lebanon and Mexico, we identified the words which were included in the list of 620 in Osgood's atlas. We excluded explicit references to other countries, but did not limit ourselves to specific references to the two countries on the assumption that meanings attached to countries can come from the broader context in which information about those countries is presented as well as from explicit assertions about them. Of course, the list of words did not include all of the references to the two countries. And the list, on the whole, emphasizes mundane, common-place words more than emotion-laden words. But while we cannot capture all of the references to Lebanon and Mexico in the two magazines with this technique, the "scoop," as it were, is the same for both so that the samples are equivalent.

For each word in the sample, we recorded the cultural

values associated with each culture. These ranged from +3 (good, strong, active) to -3 (bad, weak, passive). With the data set, we can answer these questions:

1. Are the two countries treated differently on each of the three dimensions of subjective meaning?

2. Are there differences in the subjective meanings attached to the coverage by the two different language/cultural groups?

Later, we can also expand the analysis by holding up a kind of cultural mirror to see how Mexican readers of Time and Newsweek would see coverage of their country differently from Lebanese readers and, in a similar fashion, how readers in these two countries would differ in their perceptions of the way Lebanon was covered.

We regard this initial investigation as exploratory; later, we hope to include evaluative meanings from other countries as additional factors. At this point, we are limited because each word from the magazines that is included in the linguistic atlas becomes a unit of analysis each time it appears and because each additional culture adds another factor to the analysis. As other countries are added, the data set expands almost exponentially.

The analysis of cultural differences in news magazine coverage of Mexico and Lebanon takes the form of three 2x2 analyses of variance in which the factors are (1) the country referred to in the news magazines (Mexico or Lebanon) and (2) the country from which the subjective meaning is taken (also

Mexico or Lebanon). The dependent variables are the three dimensions of the semantic differential -- evaluation, activity, potency. While it is possible to combine the data into a single 2x2x3 design, the size of the data set becomes unwieldy, and higher-order interactions (which are the only additional source of variance) are likely to be uninterpretable.

Results

In Table 1, we present the summary statistics from the two independent variables and three dependent variables. We also include correlation coefficients (eta) between the pairs of independent variables.

Table 1 about here

The news about these two countries, on the whole, is more good than bad (+.98 on a scale from -3 to +3), somewhat more strong than weak (+.67 on the same scale) and neither active nor passive (-.01). Even these marginal statistics make one question the assertion that news from the Third World is mostly negative; these two countries were, according to our criteria of subjective meaning, given rather strong positive coverage. But we do see some evidence of differences between Lebanon and Mexico: coverage of Mexico is somewhat more positive than than of Lebanon, while the subjective meanings of the words associated with both countries in newsmagazine coverage are more positive to Lebanese readers than to a Mexican reading the same

material.

To see how these two inependent variables operate together, we turn to a set of three simple 2x2 analyses of variance in which the cultural meanings assigned to the words drawn from the newsmagazines as measured by Osgood are the dependent variables and the independent variables are the countries being described (Mexico or Lebanon) as perceived by natives of the same countries.

The results of this analysis are shown in Tables 2, 3 and 4.

Tables 2, 3 and 4 about here

In the evaluative dimension, which is the strongest of the three and generally accounts for the most variance in the measurement of subjective meaning, differences in both country described and country perceived are significant; the former is significant at the .01 level, while the latter is significant at .05 but not .01. This means that Mexico was described by words which are seen as more favorable by both Mexicans and Lebanese. But the differences in evaluative meanings also differ significantly between the two cultures. From the etas in Table 1, we see that the difference in coverage of the two countries accounts for somewhat more variance than differences in cultural meanings -- .12 vs. .08. The multiple correlation (R) indicates that the two variables together produce a correlation of .14, not dramatic, but generally in the range that one finds in

social science research.

For the potency dimension (strong-weak) and activity dimension (active-passive), the results are somewhat different. There is no difference in coverage of the two countries in potency but some difference (significant at .05 but not at .01) in activity. However, in both cases, there are strong differences (significant at .01) in the cultural meanings of the words; the Lebanese, as we saw in Table 1, perceive these words as more potent than the Mexicans, while the Mexicans attach a cultural meaning of much greater activity to them than do the Lebanese. In both dimensions, the variance explained by the differences in cultural meanings is much greater than that explained by differences in coverage itself. Together, the two independent variables produce a multiple correlation of only .11 on the potency dimension but a multiple correlation of .61 on the activity dimension.

Discussion

What do these results tell us about the nature of newsmagazine coverage of these two very different Third World cultures? First, as other studies have shown, we find no evidence to support the argument that the Third World is covered in mostly negative ways. In this case, using subjective meanings of words associated with the two countries, we find a strong positive cultural meaning, a somewhat less strong but still positive image of power and essentially a neutral coverage of activity.

There are some differences between the two countries. Mexico is linked to words which generally carry a more favorable conrotation than is Lebanon and also words which are seen in both cultures as more active. The difference on the first dimension is strong; the latter difference is weaker. We would have to examine the actual words to see if they could be linked to differences in specific events, but it is likely that coverage of Lebanon included the civil war which would be perceived as negative in any culture. In contrast, in 1979, Mexico was in the news in the United States because of its increasing economic power and associated wealth; we would expect coverage of that type to contain positive subjective evaluations.

The important differences, however, are in the cultural differences in the meanings of the words associated with the two countries. Most of the difference is in the eye of the beholder, or more accurately in this case, in the eye of the reader. Lebanese and Mexican readers would, in fact, see quite different meanings in the same words: Lebanese would see the coverage as more positive and more powerful than Mexicans, but in contrast, Mexican readers would perceive the coverage as more active than Lebanese reading the same material.

We do not suggest that this analysis answers all the questions about the quality of Western news coverage of the Third World, but it does add evidence to the growing body of studies which challenge the almost-axiomatic assertion that the Third World is subjected to different, negative manner by the

influential Western media and news agencies. And it also questions the equally axiomatic claim by many Westerners who argue that the news is mostly "bad." Here is evidence that two Third World countries are associated with words which are strongly "good" in the connotative lexicon of two diverse cultures.

Would coverage of the United States differ significantly from this pattern? And would the connotative meanings of American English differ from the findings of this analysis? We do not know, of course, but we do intend to pursue this research to expand the number of languages and the variety of media, including non-American media as well as the newsmagazines.

Of course, our analysis will always be limited to the 620 words in the master list and the 23 cultures in Osgood's cross-cultural data-collection effort. But this approach provides an important perspective for research on problems of international news flow that the traditional rigorous content analyses cannot provide. Content analysis research must inevitably adopt the perspective of a non-partisan observer in order to achieve an acceptable level of reliability. But as we argued in urging a reconsideration of news bias, that "objective" perspective may not be appropriate if we want to understand the reactions of news readers, listeners and viewers. The "subjective" perspective our respondents use -- and which we ourselves use most of the time as well as news consumers -- may be better to if we want to deal with some of the important issues that are likely to continue to occupy this important part

of international communication research. Surely, if we want to understand the issues raised in the current debate, we ought to be willing to see through the eyes of the participants.

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Table 1: Mean Values and Correlations of Three Dimensions of Subjective Meaning in Newsmagazine Coverage of Mexico and Lebanon.

	Evaluation	Potency	Activity
Total	0.98	0.67	-0.01
Coverage of:			
Mexico	1.08	0.65	0.02
Lebanon	0.86	0.70	-0.05
Eta	.12	.03	.06
Perceived by:			
Mexico	0.91	0.61	0.35
Lebanon	1.05	0.74	-0.39
Eta	.08	.10	.61
R	.14	.10	.61

Table 2: ANOVA Summary Table of Evaluative Dimension

* * * * * * * * * * A N A L Y S I S O F V A R I A N C E * * * * * * * * * *

EVALUATE
BY COUNTRY
PERCEIVE

* *

SOURCE OF VARIATION	SUM OF SQUARES	DF	MEAN SQUARE	F	SIGNIF OF F
MAIN EFFECTS	15.135	2	7.567	9.594	0.000
COUNTRY	10.568	1	10.568	13.398	0.000
PERCEIVE	4.493	1	4.493	5.697	0.017
2-WAY INTERACTIONS	0.708	1	0.708	0.898	0.344
COUNTRY PERCEIVE	0.708	1	0.708	0.898	0.344
EXPLAINED	15.843	3	5.281	6.695	0.000
RESIDUAL	741.435	940	0.789		
TOTAL	757.278	943	0.803		

956 CASES WERE PROCESSED.
12 CASES (1.3 PCT) WERE MISSING.

Table 3: ANOVA Summary Table of Potency Dimension

* * * * * * * * * * A N A L Y S I S O F V A R I A N C E * * * * * * * * * *

POTENCY
BY COUNTRY
PERCEIVE

* *

SOURCE OF VARIATION	SUM OF SQUARES	DF	MEAN SQUARE	F	SIGNIF OF F
MAIN EFFECTS	4.548	2	2.274	5.399	0.005
COUNTRY	0.473	1	0.473	1.122	0.290
PERCEIVE	4.090	1	4.090	9.710	0.002
2-WAY INTERACTIONS	0.754	1	0.754	1.790	0.181
COUNTRY PERCEIVE	0.754	1	0.754	1.790	0.181
EXPLAINED	5.302	3	1.767	4.196	0.006
RESIDUAL	395.907	940	0.421		
TOTAL	401.209	943	0.425		

956 CASES WERE PROCESSED.
12 CASES (1.3 PCT) WERE MISSING.

Table 4: ANOVA Summary Table of Activity Dimension

* * * * * * * * * * A N A L Y S I S O F V A R I A N C E * * * * * * * * * *

ACTIVITY
BY COUNTRY
PERCEIVE

* *

SOURCE OF VARIATION	SUM OF SQUARES	DF	MEAN SQUARE	F	SIGNIF OF F
MAIN EFFECTS	129.734	2	64.867	278.515	0.000
COUNTRY	1.327	1	1.327	5.699	0.017
PERCEIVE	128.542	1	128.542	551.912	0.000
2-WAY INTERACTIONS	0.169	1	0.169	0.724	0.395
COUNTRY PERCEIVE	0.169	1	0.169	0.724	0.395
EXPLAINED	129.903	3	43.301	185.918	0.000
RESIDUAL	218.929	940	0.233		
TOTAL	348.832	943	0.370		

956 CASES WERE PROCESSED.
12 CASES (1.3 PCT) WERE MISSING.